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INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: CHOOSING THE RIGHT TARGET

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INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: CHOOSING THE RIGHT TARGET

Brian Michael Jenkins
The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California
March 1981

Is the Soviet Union supporting and fostering international terrorism? The simple answer is yes. The Soviet Union does provide support for terrorist activities, but that does not adequately explain the existence and persistence of world-wide terrorism. More important, in pointing the finger at Moscow, however guilty it may be, we should be careful not to diminish opportunities to do something effective to combat international terrorism.

It would be a mistake to leap from evidence of Soviet involvement to a conspiracy theory of terrorism. Conspiracy theories have attractive features: They provide a single and simple explanation for complex phenomena, and they provide a villain, usually a "popular" villain: one who is foreign, different, appears to be doing well, or does not play by the same rules. For the Iranian militants holding our embassy in Teheran, the American government was the devil--the "great Satan," they called it--behind all of Iran's problems from the country's political turmoil to the cultural shock of unveiled women appearing in public.

The idea of a central conspiracy with a master plan behind terrorism appeals not only to the masses but also to the mighty. For one thing, it provides a worthy foe. Writing after the election last November, Hamilton Jordan, President Carter's closest advisor, claimed that nationwide frustration over the hostage crisis in Iran was the principal factor in Carter's defeat. The implications of that conclusion must be horrifying to any major political leader: a president of the United States brought down by a handful of crazy militants without missiles, without armies! Terrorism, as some in the previous administration were fond of saying, is merely a nuisance. No one wants to fight, let alone be mortally wounded by a mere nuisance.

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It is difficult to refute conspiracy theories. If the KGB isn't behind terrorism, then who is? The experts begin by pointing out that terrorism is a complex phenomenon, then drone on about the need to understand political, social, economic, and historical factors as well as the impact of modern technology, stressing somewhere along the way that no single theory explains the whole thing. Feet shuffle; the audience yawns. Try to get that into a 75-second clip for the evening news. But dark and vast conspiracies, master villains with foreign agents behind them--that's the stuff of movies and novels.

What really is the Soviet role in international terrorism? The Soviet Union has openly declared its support of those it calls "national liberation movements," those who, in its definition, fight against colonialism and foreign interference. Moscow publishes no list of approved national liberation movements and has no established criteria that would entitle a group to recognition as a national liberation movement deserving Soviet support.

Actually, Soviet backing has little to do with any specific qualifications of a group. Instead, a national liberation movement often is a group whose objectives and activities happen to correspond with the aims of Soviet foreign policy at a given moment. Generally, national liberation movements have been Marxist guerrilla groups fighting Western-oriented governments in the Third World. The Soviet Union provides them with various forms of direct and indirect support, including arms and training, and some of those groups have employed terrorist tactics--kidnapping, hijackings, embassy seizures--in the course of their struggles. Terrorist tactics have played an extremely important role in the struggle of the Palestinian groups, for example, whose members have received military training in the Soviet Union. This training has included instruction in guerrilla warfare, bomb-making, techniques of sabotage; it may or may not include kidnapping and hijacking.

Soviet allies and satellites provide support to an even wider range of groups. Cuba has trained members of Latin America's guerrilla groups. Libya and South Yemen provide training facilities and other forms of direct support to Middle Eastern and West European groups not

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likely to be considered national liberation movements. Palestinians and members of the Japanese Red Army received training in North Korea.

We cannot say that North Korea or Cuba trained people to become terrorists. However, Cuba counselled them in terrorist activities--in at least one case, advising them that a well-established urban guerrilla group might kidnap business executives for a ransom but that a new group should not, lest it appear to be a criminal gang. But such advice is a long way from a blueprint for terrorism.

Palestinians who have received Soviet training along with Arab financing have in turn provided training, weapons, asylum or other assistance to terrorist groups in Western Europe: members of West Germany's Baader-Meinhof and June 2 groups, Italy's Red Brigades, and Spain's Basque terrorists. A former high-ranking member of Italy's Red Brigades, for example, talks of weapons provided by the Palestinians. In return, these groups have assisted the Palestinians in their activities in Europe.

In sum, the Soviet Union and its allies provide support to groups that have used terrorist tactics in the course of their struggle. Recipients of this support, notably the Palestinians, have in turn supported groups who use terrorist tactics exclusively. Beyond this point, the evidence of Soviet support, let alone Soviet orchestration, becomes murky.

The hottest controversy arises from Soviet support of terrorist groups in Western Europe--yet there is little evidence of direct links between the two. To be sure, the Soviets would be careful to conceal such involvement, because the West would take a far darker view of active Soviet support in the form of money, weapons, and training for groups like the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Irish Republic Army, the Basque separatists, or the Red Brigades of Italy than it would of Soviet involvement in Third World struggles.

There is no convincing evidence that the Soviets created Western Europe's terrorist groups or participated in the planning or execution of specific terrorist operations in the West. Nor can a convincing argument be made that Soviet support, direct or indirect, has been of more than modest importance for Europe's terrorist groups. True, the

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IRA acquired some weapons in Czechoslovakia, but arms have been smuggled to the IRA from the United States, and a lot of money used to purchase arms has been collected from sympathizers in this country. Most of the explosives used by the Basques are stolen from construction sites in Spain. Italy's terrorists may have Czech pistols but they have also stolen weapons from arsenals in Italy. In today's world, explosives and arms of all types are widely available.

Finally, it cannot be said that support from the Soviets or from any other outside source has made terrorists much more effective. Once a person makes up his mind to become a terrorist, the demands for skill and knowledge are not very high. The constraints are not technical, but human--the tension of living a double life and being on the run, the prospect of having no way out of a terrorist group except by way of the cemetery or defection and probable imprisonment.

Terrorists have a high rate of success in their operations. But terrorists can strike anytime they choose and their targets are virtually unlimited. Airports have tight security; trains and train stations do not. If one person is well protected, terrorists may choose another not so well protected.

Planning by terrorists is sometimes extraordinarily loose and their performance is sometimes comic. Terrorists aiming a Soviet bazooka at an El Al airliner in Paris missed and hit a Yugoslav airliner instead. Terrorists have seldom attacked heavily defended targets, but they sometimes take big risks in allowing themselves to become hostages, for example, when they seize embassies. Often they get away, not always because they are good but because they trade the lives of hostages for safe passage to a friendly country or because governments sometimes simply let them go.

Publicly identifying Moscow as the seat of international terrorism imposes some costs on us, and may be counterproductive. Hard evidence of direct Soviet involvement must be marshalled; without it the alternative will be to shade the allegation, giving greater weight to the easily demonstrated indirect link between Moscow and international terrorism: Moscow supports those who aid terrorists and thus is indirectly culpable. But even that elaboration however true, represents a slight

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backing off and leaves an impression that the accusation may have gotten beyond the evidence.

The seizure of the American embassy in Iran, in my view, at least temporarily healed the divisions that characterized the post-Vietnam era in the United States. Perhaps not since World War II has American public opinion been so united on any issue of foreign policy as it has been on the issue of terrorism. But linking the struggle against international terrorism to the renewal of cold war rhetoric imperils that unity.

Having charged the Soviet Union with supporting international terrorism, what is the United States going to do about it? Terrorism, overall, has been increasing in volume and severity for the past 13 years. Doubtless it will persist. What if it doesn't decline? What if it continues to increase? Does that mean we have not succeeded in getting Moscow to desist in its support of international terrorism? Will it mean that Moscow is thumbing its nose at Washington?

Terrorism may decline for reasons that have nothing to do with the level of Soviet support, particularly in Western Europe which attracts most of our attention here. The leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization has reduced its terrorist campaign in Europe for the time being, in a bid for legitimacy and respect in Western capitals. Hard pressed by authorities throughout Europe, West Germany's terrorists have not been able to mount a major operation since 1977. Italy's terrorists are still capable of a major operation such as the recent kidnapping of a high-ranking magistrate in Rome, but suffered heavy losses to police last year.

Statistics already show a shift from Western Europe back to Latin America as the leading theater of terrorist activity. This is largely the result of growing political turmoil in Central America. Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil wiped out the terrorist groups active in those countries at the beginning of the 1970s.

The Soviet Union now faces an intriguing problem. If terrorism declines now, will the world conclude that the Soviet Union really was responsible for terrorism and has now yielded to U.S. pressure? This reminds me of a discussion I once had with the leader of an opposition

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party in Guatemala, accused by his government of having been behind a spate of terrorist bombings in the capital city. "We were not responsible," he said, "but if the bombings stopped, everyone would think we were responsible. It would confirm the government's accusation." To maintain the credibility of the group's denial, the bombings had to continue.

Most important, publicly pointing a finger at the Soviet Union, whatever the merits of the case, could in fact cost us an opportunity to do something effective about international terrorism.

Moments of global agreement on the matter of international terrorism are rare. We are at such a moment now. Like windows for space shots--those short periods of time when the planets and moons are correctly aligned--there are windows for launching diplomatic initiatives. Two recent trends have caused increasing concern, and thereby create new opportunities.

The first is the increasing assaults on the diplomatic community. Kidnapping diplomats and seizing embassies have become a common form of protest and coercion. In the past ten years, known terrorist groups and other armed militants have taken over embassies or consulates almost fifty times--nearly half of them in the last two years. This does not count the numerous times that mobs have sacked embassies or unarmed protesters have occupied them without taking hostages. During the same decade, nearly a hundred diplomats were kidnapped or murdered. Last year anti-Castro extremists gunned down a Cuban diplomat assigned to the United Nations. Last month, Basque terrorists kidnapped three consuls in Spain to demand the release of 300 of their jailed comrades.

It therefore seems to be a propitious time right now to seek an international agreement reasserting diplomatic immunity and calling for diplomatic isolation of those nations that are truly negligent in providing security for diplomats and embassies, or those who, like Iran, align themselves with terrorists who seize embassies. Such an agreement could also call for sanctions against any nation that fails to prosecute or extradite terrorists who seize embassies.

The issue here is not one of politics, but of the traditions and laws that permit the conduct of diplomacy even between adversaries.

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In this area there is some international consensus. The world community generally supported the American position in the Iranian crisis. True, this support was in large measure only verbal, but having created its own political and economic chaos Iran would have been to a degree immune to the sanctions that might have been imposed. Conventions are only paper agreements but they provide a basis for later enforcement. Not surprisingly, the diplomats of the world agree that they ought not to be the targets of terrorism.

Another diplomatic initiative might be timely right now--one aimed at the increasing employment of terrorist groups or terrorist tactics by governments against foreign foes or domestic dissidents living abroad. Last year, for example, while Iranian militants were holding our embassy in Teheran, Iranian hit teams unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Iran's former prime minister in Paris and successfully assassinated a former Iranian official living in Washington. Libyan assassins roamed the capitals of Europe, killing Libyans who failed to heed Colonel Qaddafi's warning to return to Libya. In 1976, anti-Castro extremists in this country murdered a former Chilean cabinet minister in Washington at the behest of the Chilean secret service. Government-backed assassination campaigns are not new; we ourselves cannot claim innocence. U.S. Senate investigations in 1975 concluded that the government had been involved in several unsuccessful attempts to assassinate foreign leaders, including Fidel Castro and Patrice Lumumba. But government-backed assassination campaigns increased, and in some cases are being openly avowed in blatant disregard for the rules that govern international relations. As in the case of attacks on diplomats, it might be feasible to identify state-sponsored assassinations abroad as a problem requiring international attention and cooperation in the form of sanctions against violators.

Such agreements are difficult to enforce, but they can lead to more active cooperation. For example, international conventions on airline hijacking and bilateral agreements, together with pressure for increased security at airports, have reduced the number of terrorist hijackings. Now is the time for expanding consensus and cooperation still more. No international agreement will solve the problem of terrorism, but neither will extensive focus on Moscow's involvement.

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If we publicly blame the Soviet Union for terrorism, any measure we propose to combat it may be taken as merely an anti-Soviet ploy, and we will lose consensus. Some nations will predictably reject all antiterrorist measures on those grounds alone. Others, including some of our allies, whatever they believe, will find it difficult for reasons of policy to associate themselves with what appear to be primarily anti-Soviet efforts.

The Soviet Union would find it awkward to openly oppose precisely drawn conventions that bolster diplomatic immunity--the Soviets have embassies, too--or that aim at state-sponsored terrorism abroad. Ultimately, such conventions could even constrain their behavior. But if viewed as anti-Soviet initiatives, the Soviet Union has little to lose by opposition to American "schemes" that would, in their words, deprive the oppressed of the world of their legitimate right to fight for freedom.

We could seek new agreements on terrorism. If we go after the Russians instead, the terrorists may get away.

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